



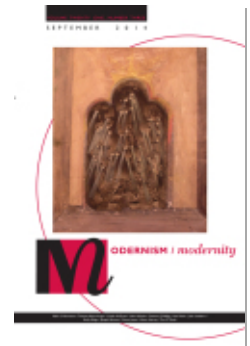
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Monocles on Modernity

Marius Hentea

To design the cover of *The New Yorker's* inaugural issue, Rea Irvin turned to the standardbearer of Edwardian knowledge, the eleventh edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, for a portrait of Gédéon-Gaspard-Alfred de Grimaud, comte d'Orsay et du Saint-Empire, a dandy who had conquered London society in the 1820s and was close friends with Lord Byron. While one might imagine that the *New Yorker* wished to convey this mondaine literary association, Irvin, who added a monocle to the original portrait, was more interested in the Comte d'Orsay's status as "*un roi de la mode*."¹ For when that first *New Yorker* hit the stands on 21 February 1925, fashion was one of the ruling passions of transatlantic society, dissected in the popular press, made global through cinema, and psychoanalysed by Freud's disciples. Irvin's cover—a sexually ambiguous dandy (who became a woman for the 1996 anniversary issue) in a top hat examining a butterfly through a monocle held at arm's length—has become one of modernism's emblems, depicting stylishness and beauty, nature and industry, the gaze and the ephemeral, the European cultural past pitched against American modernity, the snobbishness of the dandy and the mass appeal of a fifteen-cent magazine.² In a curious twist of modernist art mixing with life, Irvin's dandy—christened "Eustace Tilley" several months later—came to be listed in the telephone directory.³

The monocle is more than a curious item from an American "magazine of sophistication." While monocles existed from the early 1800s and were worn by Napoleon and Beethoven, Marx and Bismarck (and ridiculed in *Little Dorritt* when Barnaby's monocle keeps falling into his soup), the modernist period abounded in them. Famous modernist monocle wearers spanned

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214 fields and countries: there were authors (W.H. Auden, André Breton, Mikhail Bulgakov, G.K. Chesterton, Joseph Conrad, Janet Flanner, Radclyffe Hall, Richard Huelsenbeck, Eça de Queiroz, Henri de Régnier, Joseph Roth, Tristan Tzara, Jacques Vaché, and W.B. Yeats), publishers (Grant Richards), film-makers (Fritz Lang and Erich von Stronheim), impressarios (Diaghilev), philosophers (G.E.M. Anscombe), and visual artists (Raoul Hausmann, Karl Schmidt-Rottluff, Gino Severini). Even forty years after Zurich and Paris Dada, Tristan Tzara's monocle was mythic: in 1961 Matthew Josephson implored Tzara to send a photograph of his younger monocled self.⁴ Public figures wearing monocles included Joseph Chamberlain, "famous the world over for two things—his orchids and his monocle," and his son Austen, but also Quentin Lumsden, the publicity officer for the British Scrap Federation, an updated guild for rag-and-bone men.⁵ Because of American sensibilities, Woodrow Wilson wore spectacles in public but a monocle in private.⁶ In popular culture, the monocle was used by music-hall performers and actors (Ralph Lynn, Heather Thatcher, Vest Tilley) and named horses ("Oh for a Monocle"). Outside the ring, boxers Jack Dempsey and Desmond Jeans sported monocles, which were also the accessory of choice for con men who sought to pass themselves off as aristocrats. A German firm providing stylish men for "small suburban parties for a reasonable fee" had available for hire "dancing men with monocle" (price 3 to 10 marks).⁷ Even Mr. Peanut, who was launched in the 1920s, had one—after all, Babe Ruth, the idol of millions of American boys, had been photographed with a monocle on a night out. The gossip columnist for London's *Illustrated Sunday Herald* in 1914 was named "Monocle," and the interwar *Evening Standard* ran the column "Monocle Monologues." Less amusingly, while Hindenberg swore in the doomed "Monocle Cabinet" in 1932 (so named because it was full of elderly aristocrats), several years later in Nazi Berlin the "spy monocle" became a brisk seller: this slip of glass let a person see what was happening behind his or her back.⁸ In fiction, monocles were used by some of the period's greatest detectives, Lord Peter Wimsey and Arsène Lupin, and the house of fiction's monocle wearers also includes Captain John Good, the Scarlet Pimpernel, Bertie Wooster, and a whole host of minor characters, from society figures at Madame de Sainte Euverte's salon in *À la recherche du temps perdu* and Farrell in *Ulysses*, to the journalist in *Heart of Darkness*.⁹

While scholars have rightly pointed out the modernist obsession with vision, there has been less work on material instruments transforming the visual field.¹⁰ Although "the great army of children wearing glasses" was pointed to as a sign of physical degeneracy, monocles were not considered a remedy for a natural defect but instead foregrounded a psychological one.¹¹ They were superfluous fashion items, pure signs. Joseph Chamberlain justified his monocle by claiming that only one of his eyes needed correction; most commentators, though, considered the monocle as a transparent choice: "I suppose a monocle aids vision. / Yes, it helps people to see through the man who wears it."¹² As my readings of the popular press, Wallace Stevens's "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle," Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood*, H. Rider Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines*, and Aldous Huxley's short story "The Monocle" will show, the monocle was an object whose primary purpose was to manufacture identity. Yet the identity it created was

not fixed, as different social groups adopted the monocle and adapted its meaning for their own purposes. The monocle was both stereotypical and free of fixed meaning. A saturation of coverage in the press and use in advertisements and on the stage denuded the monocle of a stable meaning, which was said to be a quality of the object itself: "Mastery of the monocle must be complete . . . A single twitch may turn the lord of creation into a ninny."¹³

This article falls within the emerging study of modernist material culture and object studies more generally.¹⁴ I argue that the monocle's varying signification points to an underlying symbolic anarchy within the period. There are, as *The Times* insisted, "wider aspects of monoclemanship" to consider.¹⁵ If adornment was from Aristotle onwards a metaphor for style (for Henry Green, "[a] man's style is like the clothes he wears, an expression of his personality"), the monocle is doubly valuable as an object of investigation, as it is not only an extension of the body but also a double for the writer's eye.¹⁶ If modernist writers were haunted by the instability of language, and thus produced texts reflecting that fragmentation and disarray, this awareness was perhaps driven by more banal considerations than the nature of language. In the daily life of objects, because of their circulation in an emerging mass cultural field where meaning changed through imitation, recycling, and recuperation, things first began to lose their solidity.

I.

One of modernity's inaugurating texts, Charles Baudelaire's "Le Peintre de la vie moderne" (1863), begins with a series of costume engravings from the French Revolution onwards. In many ways, Baudelaire's definition of modernity as "the transitory, the fugitive, the contingent" is synonymous with fashion, which is in historical flux ("every epoch has its own bearing, look and gesture") and also marks out social types.¹⁷ Fashion's relevance becomes accentuated in transitional political periods, when the old order has lost its juridical and social power to define an individual through birth. For Baudelaire, the dandy was the great modern figure because he (and for Baudelaire dandies were men) tries to reinstate an aristocracy of the spirit at a time when tradition's pull is waning but mass society undermines the individual spirit.¹⁸

Baudelaire's association of fashion with freedom depends upon the relaxation of sumptuary laws: "Nobody from either sex can constrain any citizen from dressing in any particular manner," the decree of 8 Brumaire year 2 (29 October 1793) states, for "everyone is free to wear whatever clothing or adornment of his or her gender which pleases them."¹⁹ This was a critical moment in the emergence of what Anthony Giddens calls the "reflexive self," wherein identity is not given by social structures but is freely chosen.²⁰ Dress is one of the first sites where this occurs since it is

the means by which identities are marked out and sustained. . . . [M]odernity opened up new possibilities for the creation of identity: it unfixed individuals from traditional communities, placing them in the "melting-pot" of the city, and it extended the commodities available for purchase to an ever widening circle of people, thereby providing the necessary "raw material" for the creation of new identities.²¹

- 216 In one of the first sociological analyses of fashion, Herbert Spencer, while admitting that the subject is “difficult to deal with in a systematic matter,” points out fashion’s “intrinsically imitative” nature.²² The dandy’s task is to avoid imitation, for the starting principle of dandyism is superiority, but he must also signal himself as a dandy.²³ This double bind—not looking like others but looking like a dandy, which concedes the need for a social projection of a “type”—exposes the essential conflict of modern fashion, the need to display individuality when the social mass tolerates individuality only when it is constituted within a recognizable group identity (Goths, punks, etc.). While Beau Brummell avoided remarkable clothing, meeting an internal perfection that only he recognized, other dandies were not so restrained, as this *Times* article describes:

[he] dressed in a very grotesque and conspicuous manner, with a blue cloth roquelaure, lined with scarlet, thrown carelessly over one of his shoulders so as to display a gold eye-glass which was suspended from his neck by a chain of the same material, and instead of a hat he wore a fur cap with a broad gold band round it and tassels.²⁴

While this description makes the dandy “a Clothes-wearing Man, a Man whose trade, office and existence consists in the wearing of Clothes,” to quote Carlyle’s infamous definition, modernity witnessed a pointed engagement with fashion.²⁵ The creation of department stores, increasingly globalized supply, the rise of international magazines, and the ease of modern travel meant that fashion-conscious consumers could be kept up-to-date with the latest trends and could also purchase those items. Men were told that “the study of dress is a duty, and a duty from a man’s standpoint just as much as a woman’s. . . . [H]e should study dress, and he has just as much right to the subject as a woman.”²⁶ Critical examinations of fashion were penned by Balzac, Carlyle and Spencer, and in the first half of the twentieth century writers as diverse as Quentin Bell, J.C. Flugel, Raoul Hausmann, Adolph Loos, Georg Simmel, and Thorstein Veblen theorized fashion’s place in modern life. Fashion had erased local particularities, Eduard Fuchs argued in 1912: “Today every fashion is international, varying at most in minor points. . . .”²⁷ Its diktats were irrefutable: “Fashion seems always to be making new demands on her slaves and they seem ready to obey her mandates, no matter to what they may lead.”²⁸ Magazines like British *Vogue*, Jane Garrity points out, were allied to the modernist movement.²⁹ Futurists wrote manifestos about fashion (and then changed their views when political circumstances changed).³⁰ There were, of course, skeptics: in his 1919 series of lithographs, *Fiat modes pereat ars* (Let There Be Fashion, Down with Art), Max Ernst inverted the classical adage on the supremacy of art over fashion (and Kant’s *fiat justitia, pereat mundus*) to show a senseless mechanical universe in thrall to the world of fashion.

In 1928, the B.B.C. invited J.C. Flugel to give a series of talks on the psychological meaning of clothing; these radio addresses formed the basis of *The Psychology of Clothes*, which was published by The Hogarth Press two years later. “[C]lothes,” Flugel begins, “have entered into the very core of our existence as social beings.”³¹ The most interesting part of the book is a description of the “Great Masculine Renunciation,”

whereby men abandoned beautiful clothing for what was “only useful”.³² “modern man’s clothing abounds in features which symbolise his devotion to the principles of duty, of renunciation, and of self-control”.³³ The monocle, whose use originated in correcting visual impairment, and which could be justified by claims of utility (or used deceptively for such purposes, as in Lord Peter Wimsey’s monocle serving as a magnifying glass), fit within the overall trend in masculine fashion of an “elegance puritaine.”³⁴ The monocle was an adornment which asserted a fashionable identity without necessarily giving a man over to fashion. While Flugel’s understanding of modern male fashion highlighted the trend for uniformity, he acknowledged that the impulse for “exhibitionistic desires connected with self-display” remained, and that in many cases this “(passive) exhibitionism” could be turned to “(active) scopophilia,” whereby “the desire to be seen [is] transformed into the desire to see”.³⁵ With its stress on the visual field, the monocle was an integral part of this transformation.

While part of what Flugel called clothings’ “tools and implements,” the monocle could lead its wearer to create a persona given over to what Aldous Huxley called, as I shall later discuss, “monocularity.”³⁶ For Flugel, these instruments could threaten the ensemble since “the different parts of the whole. . . must, to some extent, mentally fuse into a unity.”³⁷ Anything which refuses “to become part of an organic whole with the body” will not undergo “the necessary process of incorporation,” with potentially dangerous consequences: “If the garment in question is liable to behave in a way that is not in accordance with the wishes of the wearer, it is apt to seem a troublesome foreign body rather than an agreeable extension of the self”.³⁸ While asymmetry is a defining quality of the monocle, the object embodies a transformative potential, whereby it can be turned into an essential signal of its wearer, whose fashionable body not only incorporates the monocle but makes it a stand-in for the wearer’s identity.³⁹

The monocle was from the first seen as part of this fashion nexus. First appearing in the early nineteenth century, it was of British origin and stemmed from the quizzer, a small round lens with a handle (imagine a magnifying glass with a looped handle).⁴⁰ Richard Corson notes that one theory holds that monocles were first introduced on the stage—which could explain the music-hall’s obsession with them—and then taken up by the aristocracy. But what is certain is that the fashion spread quickly:

Although the first monocles were certainly used for corrective purposes, later ones were often worn purely as a matter of fashion in imitation of the aristocracy. Whereas they were originally used largely by older men, later they were adopted by young men to conform to the fashion.⁴¹

By February 1911, the monocle was called “a fad of the moment” in a full-page spread in *Vogue*.

Such prominence in a mass magazine shows that the monocle was not necessarily a luxury good. Although “the caricaturist’s symbol of the ‘great English aristocrat,’” monocles “pass[ed] two or three stages down the social scale” because they were not priced out of reach of the mass market.⁴² In its 1908 sales catalogue, London opticians F.

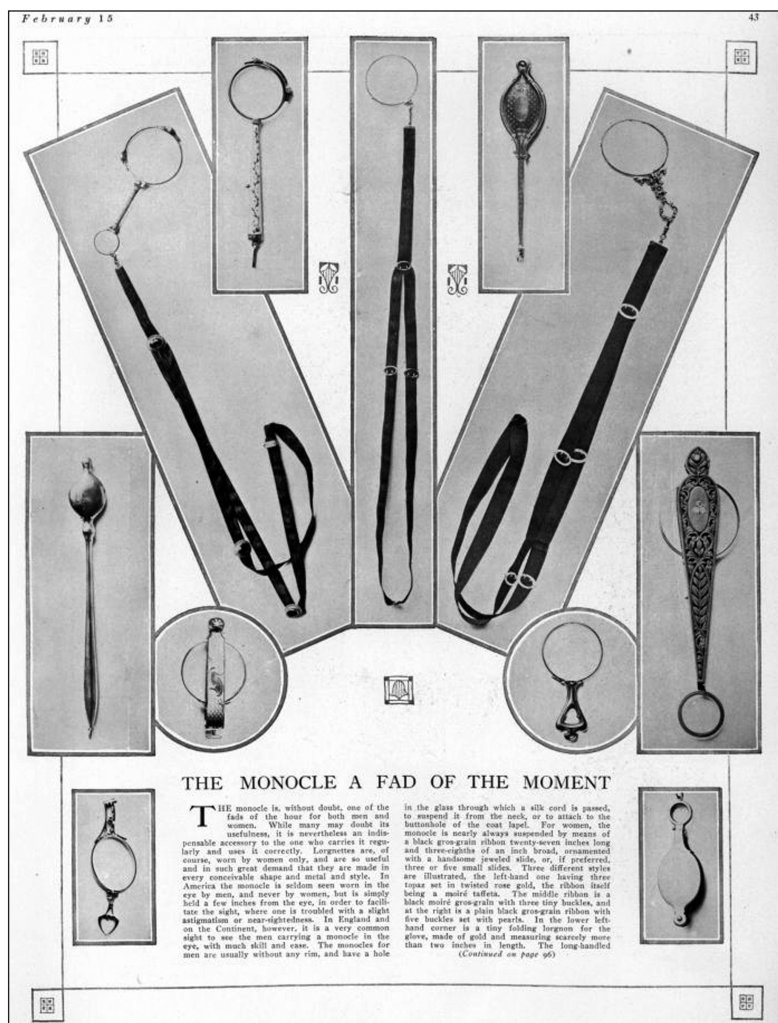
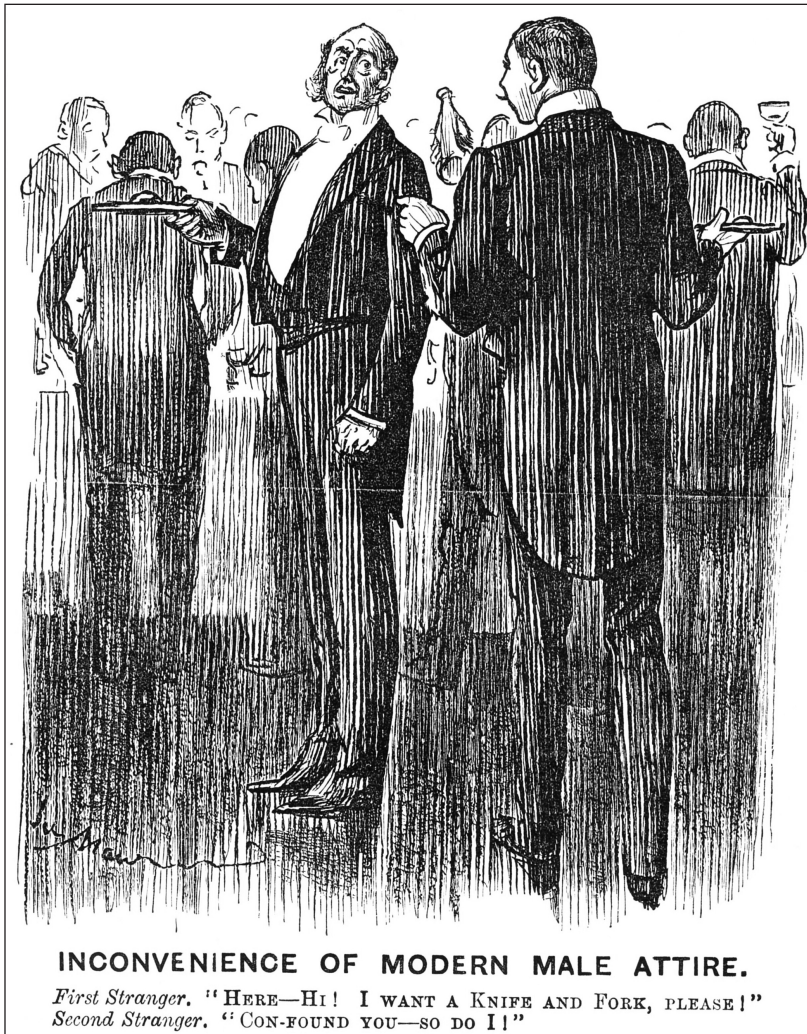


Fig. 1. *Vogue*, 15 February 1911, p. 43.

Darton & Company had a “[r]imless, white plano, bi-convex or concave, hole for cord” model on sale for 3d.⁴³ Monocles were cheaper than spectacles (as one humourist put it, “[t]imes is so hard that poor feller can’t afford more’n one spec”), which made them accessible to different social classes.⁴⁴ An 1891 *Punch* cartoon shows two men at a dinner party mistaking each other for servers because of their similar dress. That a waiter may be monocled shows the potential for misrecognition that the object had acquired.

From its earliest days, the monocle was attractive for its presumed fashionable qualities, often to the detriment of physical health:

The monocle. . . must be avoided because it disturbs the balance of binocular vision. However, grown-up children of both sexes play with the monocle. . . Numerous young



▲
Fig. 2. *Punch*, 21 February 1891, p. 95.

people with normal vision use a monocle with a plain glass. It seems truly that they use this style of eyeglass to lend themselves an amiable air of impudence and to make themselves noticed.⁴⁵

William Kitchiner, an optician and well-known cookbook author, marvelled that

[a] *Single Glass*, set in a smart Ring, is often used by Trinket-fanciers merely for Fashion's sake, by folks who have not the least defect in their Sight, and are not aware of the mischievous consequences of this pernicious plaything, which will most assuredly, in a very few Years, impair the vision of One or Both Eyes.⁴⁶

220 As the *Bazar Book of Decorum* (1870) put it:


The functions of the natural eye and eyeglasses are much abused. It is quite clear that the whole world of fashion has not all of a sudden become so afflicted with shortsightedness as to render the use of articial means for its relief universally necessary. Nine tenths of the people, male and female, who are constantly eyeing the universe and each other through glass, require no other medium than the one provided by Nature. Nothing can be more ill bred, and we assert it in the face of assenting fashion, than ogling a stranger in the streets through an eyeglass. . . .⁴⁷

This point is important: the monocle was seen as a fashion accessory, in many ways no different than jewels or gloves, because it was not considered a visual prosthetic. When the Prussian Interior Ministry banned monocles for military officers and the police, the decision was based on the fact that monocles were used for “external grounds,” as the *Guardian* reported in 1921: “The monocle is in the main a decoration. It is so effective a decoration that many adopt it as such. It is singular. It has glitter.”⁴⁸ As Joyce rebukes Tzara in Tom Stoppard’s *Travesties*, “Your monocle is in the wrong eye.”⁴⁹

II.

The monocle was associated with a diverse number of social groups, who all claimed it as a distinctive aspect of their identity. Dandies and aristocrats, military officers and con men, women and avant-gardists all took up the monocle during the modernist period. It also assumed decidedly national characteristics as an emblem of the British aristocrat and the German officer, to the rancor of the American sensibilities in both cases. The monocle’s symbolic instability shows the circuitous nature of modern fashion, whereby an item gets picked up and then, after a process of recuperation, transmutation, incorporation, and then rejection, fades away or moves on in the fashion nexus.⁵⁰

The first group to adopt the monocle was the aristocracy. James de Rothschild, Baron de Cartier de Marchienne, the Belgian Ambassador to the Court of St. James’s, and Lord Rotherwick wore one. At the 1911 Coronation Exhibition, a “Baron X” was demarcated by “nothing more formidable than a monocle, a cigarette, and a pair of gloves.”⁵¹ Noting that “peers of the realm and members of the nobility of Great Britain . . . are invariably portrayed in newspaper and magazine illustrations, in caricature and theatrical performances with a monocle screwed in one eye,” the *Washington Post* stated that, in fact, only two members of the House of Lords wore one.⁵² That reality was different than popular perceptions did not dislodge the aristocracy’s presumed link to the monocle. In a 1915 advertisement, a fictional Lord Dundreary, in tweeds, a top hat, and walking stick, is “fixing his monocle” before stating that a man could be judged by his taste in cigars. The monocle not only designates the aristocrat but also signals Lord Dundreary’s ability to “read a man’s soul.” There was something about the monocle, which could not be worn easily and which required a level of sophistication in the entire outfit, that suited the aristocracy:



**"SIR," said Lord Dundreary, fixing his monocle,
"I would read a man's soul had I the opportunity of testing his judgment in the matter of a cigar."**

Because we rely upon your judgment, and because we have confidence in ours, we offer to send you direct, post free, and without the slightest obligation on your part,
A Special 6/- Cabinet of 11 "After Dinner" Cigars for the nominal sum of 2/6.

Each cigar has a distinct appeal in the matter of size and bouquet, and we take this means of discovering which appeals to you in the hope of future business. We are willing to supply you in any quantity at wholesale price direct from our Dock Offices. The cigars in the cabinet range in price from 8/- to 100/- per 100. Try each one and let us know which is your favourite. Only one cabinet can be sent to each applicant.

SPECIAL 6/- Cabinet of 11 'After Dinner' Cigars 2/6 POST FREE.

Send your P.O. for 2/6 to-day and judge for yourself.

BOND CIGAR Co., DEPT. T. ALEXANDRA DOCK, GRIMSBY.

Fig. 3. Advertisement for the Bond Cigar Company, *The Times*, 15 March 1915, p. 6.

How tremendous a weapon it is, and how rare the qualities it demands in the wielder, we may judge by picturing our own feelings if we were compelled to adopt it. We should be conscious of assuming an airiness and doggishness of deportment to which we had no legitimate pretensions.⁵³

This natural superiority in the handling of the monocle could be inverted by the powerful, who could afford to not be fussy about their manners. Journalist Tom Driberg, whose father was in the Indian Army and rose to be Chief of Police and Inspector of Jails for the Province of Assam, remembers him having "a beard like Edward VII's and a monocle. The monocle was constantly falling out, sometimes—to my embarrassment, if guests were present—into the soup" (a literary-infused anecdote showing the mythic qualities the object had acquired).⁵⁴

Dandies, whose aristocratic aspirations were evident, took greater care of their monocles. An 1850 description of a young man at a Club dinner notes that "[h]e will eat in the eyeglass, drink in the eyeglass, flirt and polk in his eyeglass."⁵⁵ The monocle was a "diploma of dandyism," the *Pall Mall Gazette* noted in 1893.⁵⁶ Edwardian "men about town" were identifiable, *The Times* reported, "by the *gibus* and the monocle."⁵⁷ Max Beerbohm observed that on the popular stage, the "young man of fashion" was a stock figure who "[a]lways . . . wears the same vacuous face, into which a monocle is screwed."⁵⁸ For Melanie Taylor, "[t]he most obvious sign of the equivocal nature of the dandy's social, cultural, and sexual standing is the monocle."⁵⁹ The dandy could not only create a striking effect through the monocle but also, in his handling of it, become a kind of artist, since "to manipulate an eyeglass with real effect is in itself an art."⁶⁰

The great modernist poem about a dandy is Wallace Stevens's "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle" (1918). In what Frank Kermode calls a "great and obscure poem," the

222 “monocle” does not appear anywhere save the title.⁶¹ Despite its seeming absence, the monocle is a foundational metaphor for the poem’s subject, a middle-aged man trying to reclaim love. This happens in a world of increasing artificiality (“Alas! Have all the barbers lived in vain / That not one curl in nature has survived?”), slippery and impotent language (the “watery syllable,” the “book too mad to read / Before one merely reads to pass the time”), and senselessness (“The honey of heaven may or may not come, / But that of earth both comes and goes at once”).⁶² If the world of objects is the sole resting place—“I wish that I might be a thinking stone”⁶³—for “introspective exiles,”⁶⁴ the impossibility of recapturing one’s youth, and the folly of the attempt, is ironically belied by the easy fix of adorning a monocle.

Just as actors on the stage became aristocrats through the visual economy of the monocle, other types of actors—con men—used the same trick: “With spats, a monocle, red gloves, and a stick the English aristocracy is reproduced.”⁶⁵ Newspaper headlines about monocled con men include “Monocle Swindler Ends World Chase in New York Cell” or “Famous Hungarian Swindler Dies; Found Monocle His Greatest Aid.”⁶⁶ In 1934, a Lithuanian proclaimed himself Boris I, King of Andorra; he had “won their [Andorrans’] confidence in short order. Perhaps it was the deft ease with which he screwed his monocle into his right eye that impressed them”⁶⁷ Finally, the most famous depiction of the monocle as a criminal accessory is found in the story of Percy Topliss, a private who had supposedly taken part in the Étapes Mutiny and then a black marketeer who was in 1920 the target of a five-week national manhunt. Depicted to great controversy in the four-part B.B.C. miniseries *The Monocled Mutineer* (1986), Topliss disguised himself with a monocle stolen from an officer. At the time of his flight, the press noted that “[t]he length of time which the man avoided capture is in itself remarkable, seeing that his description and identity were never in the slightest doubt”—his distinguishing feature was “the gold-rimmed monocle that has been mentioned so frequently in the newspaper accounts of the man and his crime.”⁶⁸

In fiction, the most famous portrait of the monocle being used to pass oneself off as an aristocrat is the monocle worn by Felix Volkbein in Djuna Barnes’s *Nightwood* (1936), a novel obsessed with vision and seeing: “to be an animal, born at the opening of the eye, going only forward, and, at the end of the day, shutting out memory with the dropping of the lid.”⁶⁹ Surrounded by grotesque and deformed bodies, Felix’s monocle is a futile attempt to reclaim a presumed aristocratic past. The orphaned son of Guido Volkbein, a self-styled aristocrat “never appearing in public without the ribbon of some quite unknown distinction,” and Hedvig, a Viennese woman of “military beauty,”⁷⁰ Felix is a perpetual outcast with “an obsession for what he termed ‘Old Europe’: aristocracy, nobility, royalty.”⁷¹ Kept out of the war because of a blind eye, Felix’s monocle “shone, a round blind eye in the sun” in the “pageantry of the circus and the theatre” of the international circuit of the fashionable.⁷²

Felix’s monocle becomes a symbol of his desire to reproduce, to continue the family name. In the second chapter, “La Somnambule,” it is mentioned three times, and in all three cases the pressing subject is an heir, “a son who would feel as he felt about the ‘great past.’”⁷³ Walking with his wife Robin through Vienna, Felix’s “tightly held

monocle" surveys the city as he tells the story of his father and expresses his wish for a son. Felix's obsession with the past is inherited from his father, an Italian Jew whose sole legacy to his son is the family name and two portraits of presumed progenitors; in one of them "the virgin blue of the eyeballs curved out the lids as if another medium than that of sight had taken its stand beneath that flesh . . . that stare, endless and objective."⁷⁴ Fixated upon the eyes, the portrait is nonetheless a fake: Felix's father had bought "reproductions of two intrepid and ancient actors" to serve as "an alibi for the blood."⁷⁵ The monocle aligns Felix's claims to aristocracy with the portrait's preternatural gaze; yet whenever the subject of an heir arises, his monocle becomes animated: when told by the doctor that aristocracy always has a terminal line ending in madness, Felix's monocle "dropped" to leave an "unarmed eye," or, when Robin disowns their child, he "dropped his monocle and caught at it swinging."⁷⁶ Baron Felix's son, named Guido after his grandfather, turns out to be "an addict to death," a spectacle-wearing child.⁷⁷ When visiting a doctor, Felix, "catching his monocle," says that Robin "is with me in Guido; they are inseparable."⁷⁸ But as "[h]is monocle shone sharp and bright along its edge," Felix is forced to admit that the child is physically degenerate and more like his mother, the Baronin.⁷⁹

The monocle's empty value, its reduction into an inert thing, becomes only too clear as Baron Felix admits his failure in comprehending life:

The Baron caught his monocle. . . . "Once," he said, pinching his monocle into place, "I wanted, as you, who are aware of everything, know, to go behind the scenes, back-stage as it were, to our present condition, to find, if I could, the secret of time; good, perhaps, that that is an impossible ambition for the sane mind. One has, I am now certain, to be a little mad to see into the past or the future, to be a little abridged of life, to know life, the obscure life—darkly seen, the condition my son lives in; it may also be the errand on which the Baronin is going."

Taking out his handkerchief, the Baron removed his monocle, wiping it carefully.⁸⁰

When calling out for military music in a café, Felix's monocle becomes animated "by the heat of the room . . . trying not to look for what he had always sought, the son of a once great house."⁸¹ In this dim public space, the monocle that he has falsely worn can neither correct his blindness nor continue the deceit of his presumed aristocracy: an irrepressible anxiety overwhelms Felix whenever the subject of his heir and legacy arises, and the monocle becomes an object of fixation for this anxiety, subtly disowning his claims to a glorious past. It is the focal point, in other words, of an exaggerated and harmful artificiality that estranges him from his son and drives his wife away.

The aristocratic and British connotations of the monocle (P.G. Wodehouse observed that monocles in fiction "may be worn by (1) good dukes, (2) all Englishmen") resonated in America, where it was said that "Englishmen have been known to receive adoration and to have incense burnt before them in certain parts of the United States because of their skillful handling of a monocle."⁸² A Midwesterner "solemnly declared," *The Times* reported, "that in his part of the world none thought of an Englishman without also thinking of a monocle."⁸³ The American popular press railed against such foreign

224 pretensions: "Every cad who wears London clothes and a monocle and tries to talk like an Englishman is a traitor insofar as he has an acted contempt for his own country and a willingness to set up a foreign form of aristocracy here."⁸⁴ This known American antipathy to monocles led to calls within Britain for the Foreign Office to blacklist any monocled diplomats from attending the Washington Disarmament Conference in 1921.⁸⁵ When Jack Dempsey returned to America in 1922, the heavyweight said of his new monocle, "You're not in the swim abroad unless you have one of them, y'know. But I'm in America now."⁸⁶

The other foreign evil besides aristocracy that sprung from the monocle was Prussian militarism. The stereotype may have originated with General Ludendorff; in 1919, an American boy's weekly could present the following image:

Imagine a Prussian staff officer of high rank . . . He was that long-headed, thin, sharp-faced type that now and then appears in the Prussian aristocracy . . . and he stared at his captors through his monocle. . . . The Americans surveyed him curiously . . . They had never seen such a creature before, unless in some theatre. In monocle, high collar, red-lined cape, patent-leather boots, he seemed to them a being from another world.⁸⁷

In the Second World War, the monocle took on more sinister tones. Reports that wartime economy measures shut down German monocle production inspired a doggerel poem, "What! No Monocles?," in the *New York Times* on 7 December 1941, the day of the attack on Pearl Harbor:

Now this is vile, illegal, uncanonical
To rob the Nazi army of its monocle!
For on the screen, how may the Prussian colonel
Or secret agent weave his snares infernal,
Then grimly gloat with tight-lipped smile ironical
Without a monocle?⁸⁸

The ditty plays on a staple of wartime films, the image of the "suede-gloved, monocle-wearing, heel-clicking Nazi extending his right arm forward exclaiming 'Heil Hitler'."⁸⁹ In Jules Dassin's *Nazi Agent* (1942), there are two identical twins: Hugo, with his "wicked monocle," works as the Nazi consul in New York City, while Otto, donning "benign spectacles in steel frames," runs a book shop.⁹⁰ Discovering the Nazi spy ring Hugo organized, Otto murders his twin brother and becomes a double agent, disrupting the cell's sinister activities before handing the spies over to the American authorities. The doubling of spectacles as democratic and American against monocles as authoritarian and German could not be more clearly shown. That same year, Superman's nemesis was *Herr Monocle*, whose actions are a page out of contemporary terrorism: to free imprisoned Nazi saboteurs, he shuts down the electrical grid; he plants a bomb in the subway; his minions kill hundreds by putting deadly gas into a factory's ventilation system; and he tries to contaminate the city's water supply. In the next installment of the comic, Superman travels to Berlin, where, aided by a monocle, he disguises himself as a Nazi officer, and his mission is none other than to save Santa Claus.

The monocle's national associations collapsed when dealing with "exotics," and instead came to signify a unified Western civilization. Stories drawing attention to the monocle's power over natives, as if Lemuel Gulliver's spectacles had been reincarnated, were legion. Walter Bennett, a land surveyor in the Gold Coast during the Ashanti Uprising, was "Saved by a Monocle": falling to the ground, it was considered an extra eye, which allowed him to escape unharmed from his pursuers.⁹¹ A British officer in Albania in 1914 reported that his monocle was "an object of great interest . . . [t]hey believed it was essential to the working of the gun, and I did not dispel the illusion . . ."⁹²

The most famous description of the monocle serving as a stand-in for civilization in an imperial context is found in H. Rider Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines* (1885). Captain John Good is first presented as fighting against the native landscape's uncleanness:

There he sat upon a leather bag, looking just as though he had come in from a comfortable day's shooting in a civilised country, absolutely clean, tidy, and well dressed. He had on a shooting suit of brown tweed, with a hat to match, and neat gaiters. He was, as usual, beautifully shaved, his eyeglass and his false teeth appeared to be in perfect order, and altogether he was the neatest man I ever had to do with in the wilderness.⁹³

Whatever the conditions, Good was always "actively employed in making a most elaborate toilet," because, as he explains, "I always like to look like a gentleman."⁹⁴ This question of being a gentleman is central to the narrative, Allan Quatermain notes at the opening:

What is a gentleman? I don't quite know, and yet I have had to do with niggers—no, I'll scratch that word "niggers" out, for I don't like it. I've known natives who *are*, and so you'll say, Harry, my boy, before you're done with this tale, and I have known mean whites with lots of money and fresh out from home, too, who *ain't*. Well, at any rate, I was born a gentleman, though I've been nothing but a poor travelling trader and hunter all my life. Whether I have remained so I know not, you must judge of that. Heavens knows I've tried.⁹⁵

Captain Good's profession, modern medicine, contrasts him with the unscientific natives; he is "the holder of the compass," thus signalling his mastery over technology; and the almanac he carries ("We had kept a careful note of the days") gives the expedition a god-like foresight.⁹⁶

Good's obsession with cleanliness saves the expedition from a tribe of natives: he is washing and shaving when the tribe appears, and leaping out to fight, his appearance—he managed to shave only one side of his face—startles the tribe. The natives are even more impressed by his false teeth and his "one shining and transparent eye;" the tribal elder even prays, "Listen, children of the stars, children of the shining eye and the movable teeth, who roar out in thunder and slay from afar."⁹⁷ Good is told that he must live up to his persona, and that henceforth he could only appear "in a flannel shirt, a pair of boots, and an eye-glass."⁹⁸ And Good makes sure of it, never letting his monocle drop: "Good's eye-glass was still fixed in Good's eyes. I doubt whether he had ever taken it out at all. Neither the darkness, nor the plunge in the subterranean river, nor the roll

226 down the slope, had been able to separate Good and his eye-glass."⁹⁹ Nothing in the colonial world can dislodge his monocle, which is a symbol of gentlemanly qualities and imperial power, civilization itself, in contrast to the "single and enormous uncut diamond" on the forehead of Twala, king of the Kukuanas, "the one-eyed, the mighty, the husband of a thousand wives."¹⁰⁰ Despite Quatermain's proclamation that "we white men wed only with white women like ourselves," Good falls in love with Foulata, a native woman who nurses him back to health.¹⁰¹ Good's love for Foulata recompenses her fidelity and, after her death, he honors her memory. Although Good has crossed racial boundaries in this love, Haggard presents it as eminently English and manly.

Good's masculine appropriation of the monocle raises another aspect of "monocularity"—the presumed gender status of the object. Marjorie Garber sees the object as the "displacement upward of the single and singular male organ."¹⁰² Feminist readings of the monocle—mainly focused on the gaze and cross-dressing—have drawn attention to its gender connotations.¹⁰³ During the interwar period, lesbians adopted the item, with *Le Monocle* serving as the preeminent lesbian cabaret in Montparnasse in the 1930s.

The outstanding visual image of the monocle's contested gendered status was Romaine Brooks's portrait of Una Troubridge. Exhibited in Paris and New York in 1925, it featured Radclyffe Hall's lover in a black tuxedo jacket and monocle; the portrait has been called "a public statement of commitment to a cause."¹⁰⁴ The elongated verticality of the canvas and the off-center position of the sitter draws the viewer's eyes to the monocle, whose ribbon is (along with the black dog's nose) the only element crossing the center plane. The muted colours and the somber dress gives the portrait an austere, almost funereal, look. As Brooks's title notes, one is not only looking at "Una" but also "Lady Troubridge." A prominent figure in the "upper echelons of Paris's cosmopolitan lesbian society," Brooks and her lover, Natalie Barney, hosted a salon every Friday where, as Sylvia Beach recalls, one frequently met "lesbians . . . Paris ones, and those only passing through town . . . ladies with high collars and monocles."¹⁰⁵

For some commentators, the monocle was a plaything for wealthy upper-class women, a status that diminished the revolt against masculine dominance that their monocle-wearing might have suggested.¹⁰⁶ Garber's ontological reading of the monocle, though, has remained influential:

The monocle looks nothing like a penis (or a phallus). It can be put on (inserted in the eye socket) or taken off, left to dangle, propped up imperiously as a sign of attentiveness. An indication at once of supplement and lack, both instrumental and ornamental, connoting weakness (in the eye) and strength (social position, as well as class and style), the monocle both *reflects* and *peers into or through*. Simultaneously a signifier of castration (detachable, artificial, made to be put on and taken off) and of empowerment, the monocle when worn by a *woman* emphasizes, indeed parodies, the contingent nature of power conferred by this instrumental "affectation."¹⁰⁷

While the analysis is brilliant, it lacks a historically nuanced understanding of how the monocle was appropriated by women. Avant-gardists also parodied the staid bourgeoisie with their monocles ("*regarde-moi, gentil bourgeois*," Tzara chided), but, before



▲
Fig. 4. Romaine Brooks, *Portrait of Una, Lady Troubridge* (1924), oil on canvas, 1.273m x 0.764m. Courtesy of Smithsonian American Art Museum (Washington, D.C.).

considering the monocle, one should note that any kind of eyewear for women was problematic. In 1900, an article in the *Optical Journal* noted, “Wearing spectacles or eyeglasses out of doors is always a disfigurement, often an injury, seldom a necessity . . . Glasses are very disfiguring to women and girls.”¹⁰⁸ In Henry James’s “Glasses” (1896), the narrator, a monocle-wearing male portrait painter, tells the story of a beautiful woman, Flora Saunt, whose eyesight is failing. Unmarried, she initially refuses to wear spectacles: “her idolatry of her beauty, the feeling she is all made up of, she sees in such aids nothing but the humiliation and the disfigurement.” When Flora puts on spectacles, the narrator’s disappointment is palpable:

All I saw at first was the big gold bar crossing each of her lenses, over which something convex and grotesque, like the eyes of a large insect, something that now represented her whole personality, seemed, as out of the orifice of a prison, to strain forward and press. The face had shrunk away: it looked smaller, appeared even to look plain; it was at all events, so far as the effect on a spectator was concerned, wholly sacrificed to this huge apparatus of sight.¹⁰⁹

This disfigurement becomes overbearing for Flora, who refuses to wear glasses but in so doing goes blind. While the prejudice against female eyeglasses diminished over time, it was still potent in the 1920s, with pamphlets like *Be Beautiful in Glasses: A Treatise on the Art of Utilizing Optical Illusions Produced by Spectacles and Eyeglasses to Beautify the Face* and numerous articles in the popular press trying to diminish the anxiety that spectacle-wearing might have for feminine beauty.

Despite this generalized prejudice against any sort of female eye-wear, there was a history of female appropriation of the monocle before lesbians took up the emblem in 1920s Paris.¹¹⁰ An 1898 article in *The Penny Illustrated Paper* and *Illustrated Times* states that “[t]he single eye-glass is the latest fashion among pretty girls in London,” before quoting an anonymous writer who claims that “[h]undreds of up-to-date girls are now wearing single eye-glasses, some of them in the semi-privacy of the family, it is true, but others openly in the street.”¹¹¹ In New York City at the turn of the century, the monocle “was in demand as a holiday present for fashionable young women.”¹¹² Female monocle wearers included Queen Maud of Norway, the Metropolitan Opera singer Olive Fremstad, and society heiress Mrs. Philip Van Volkenburgh. In 1913, fears that the trend of monocle-wearing at two famous all-women’s colleges, Smith and Vassar, would spread, led private girls’ high schools in Washington, D.C., to ban monocles.¹¹³ In Monte Carlo in 1921, the fad of women wearing monocles was reported, and two years later, opticians in the West End stated that “scores of women” had taken up the fashion.¹¹⁴ When London society figure Ruth Clapham married Surrey cricket captain Percy Fender in 1924, she became known, thanks to a *Pathé* newsreel, as the “monocled bride.”¹¹⁵ As women’s fashion in the 1920s moved towards a stark angularity (as related in Victor Margueritte’s 1922 bestseller, *La Garçonne*, and as Brooks’s portrait also shows), the monocle’s rounded form was a throwback to an earlier period.¹¹⁶ Gender revolt through the monocle, in other words, was not a simple issue, as the item had been appropriated mainly for reasons of fashion before it was taken up in 1920s Paris as a sexual object.

The symbolic anarchy of the monocle is the major issue. Unlike other fashion accessories, the monocle was not physically altered when a different social group took it up; there could be different types of monocles in terms of luxury and quality of materials, but otherwise the item remained as it had been when first developed in the early nineteenth century. The inability to fix down a meaning upon the monocle meant that the item was not only historical but itself an agent in historical consciousness.

III.

Aldous Huxley, who had notoriously poor eyesight, took up the thematic of vision not only in *Eyeless in Gaza* (1936) and *The Art of Seeing* (1942) but also in “The Monocle,” which appeared in the 1926 collection *Two or Three Graces and Other Stories*.¹¹⁷ Set in 1920s London, the story uses a number of monocle tropes in its presentation of a rich young man, Gregory, attempting to be fashionable. Like Huxley’s first two novels, *Chrome Yellow* (1921) and *Antic Hay* (1923), which are also set in the world of intellectual bohemia, “The Monocle” is ultimately about social alienation and the class system, with the title object serving as a contested site where Gregory’s conflicted understanding of his place within a divided British society plays out.¹¹⁸ The story can be fruitfully read to understand the monocle’s social significance and its symbolic connotations, simultaneously stereotypical and unstable.

The story begins with Gregory arriving for a dinner party and inspecting himself in a mirror at the foot of the stairs, and, throughout, questions of self-reflection and appearances versus reality, the natural and the artificial, are never far. He is cast as a vain young man: “Secretly, he thought himself handsome and was always astonished that more people were not of his opinion.”¹¹⁹ Climbing up the stairs—a movement whose class connotations will become evident later on (the others are upstairs, Gregory comes from below) —Gregory “polish[ed] his monocle as he went.”¹²⁰ Just before entering the main hall, “he inserted his monocle and replaced his handkerchief in his pocket. Squaring his shoulders, he marched in—almost militarily, he flattered himself.”¹²¹ While presenting Gregory in an unsympathetic light, and certainly the military allusion contrasts his frivolity in matters of dress to the trials undergone by soldiers and officers on the Western front (the war is not mentioned in the story, but that silence does not minimize its structural importance as a moral backdrop), the opening scene contains a sense of pathos, as the mirror accentuates Gregory’s inability to look at himself through his own eyes.¹²² Even more frightfully, his eyes seem to be detached from his person, watching over him: one reads “his monocle,” “his handkerchief,” “his pocket,” “his shoulders,” as if for Gregory possession of these objects and body parts has to be underlined. The monocle polished while mounting the stairs is society casting its gaze and his appropriation of those standards onto his very being (literally). When considering how Gregory’s three eyes (two natural and one artificial in the monocle) allude to Gregory of Nyssa, who helped consolidate the doctrine of the Trinity, Gregory’s split self appears to be calling for salvation.

Once inside the fashionable room, Gregory meets a South African acquaintance, Paxton, who calls him “Polypheme because of his monocle: Polypheme, the one-eyed, wheel-eyed Cyclops.”¹²³ Paxton is a drunkard, who marks that down on official forms as his profession: “It’s a capital profession . . . It permits you to do whatever you like—any damned thing that comes into your head.”¹²⁴ Paxton pointedly asks why Gregory wears a monocle. The response is couched in medical discourse: “‘Well, if you really want to know,’ Gregory answered stiffly, ‘for the simple reason that I happen to be short-sighted and astigmatic in the left eye and not in the right.’”¹²⁵ Paxton sees through that: “God forgive me—and I thought it was because you wanted to look like a duke

230 on the musical-comedy stage."¹²⁶ Paxton's nickname for Gregory is ironic, underscoring the gulf between the monocled society figure from the devouring monster in the *Odyssey* or the one-eyed figure of Nicolas Poussin's *Landscape with Polyphemus* who towers over mountains and an absolute nature. When it concerns Gregory, though, the immense physical power of the Cyclops turns out to be cheap West End vaudeville, with Gregory as a monocled character on stage: when Paxton calls out "Polypheme . . . funny little Polypheme," Gregory's response is to pour a drink "with dignity, with conscious grace and precision, as though he were acting the part of a man who helps himself to whisky and soda on the stage."¹²⁷ Isolating himself from the party, Gregory "leaned against the wall in the attitude of one who falls, all of a sudden, into a brown study. Blankly and pensively, he stared at a point on the opposite wall, high up, just below the ceiling. People must be wondering, he reflected, what he was thinking about. And what was he thinking about? Himself. Vanity, vanity. Oh, the gloom, the misery of it all!"—and at this point Paxton yells out again "Polypheme."¹²⁸

But it is during the initial conversation with Paxton that Gregory reflects on his own shortcomings and how his monocle cannot conceal them:

For, in reality, of course, Paxton was so devilishly nearly right. Conscious, only too acutely, of his nullity, his provincialism, his lack of successful arrogance, he had made the oculist's diagnosis an excuse for trying to look smarter, more insolent, and impressive. In vain. His eyeglass had done nothing to increase his self-confidence. He was never at ease when he wore it. Monocle-wearers, he decided, are like poets: born, not made. Cambridge had not eradicated the midland grammar-school boy. Cultured, with literary leanings, he was always aware of being a wealthy boot manufacturer's heir. He could not get used to the monocle. Most of the time, in spite of the oculist's recommendations, it dangled at the end of its string, a pendulum when he walked and involving itself messily, when he ate, in soup and tea, in marmalade and butter. It was only occasionally, in specially favourable circumstances, that Gregory adjusted it to his eye; more rarely still that he kept it, once adjusted, more than few minutes, a few seconds even, without raising his eyebrow and letting it fall again. And how seldom circumstances *were* favourable to Gregory's eyeglass!¹²⁹

Instead of aiding sight, the monocle only leads to discomfort, creating a series of questions about his station in life. His inability to keep the monocle screwed tight (one trope about monocled aristocrats consisted of stories where the most taxing physical endeavors are undertaken without the slightest consequence to the monocle's firm placement in the eye, thus legitimizing the natural supremacy of its wearer) is the obvious physical manifestation of this psychological unease. Gregory doesn't know where he fits in—although he is a millionaire, he is conscious of not being of the same sort of wealth as those surrounding him. Even if his wealth is also inherited, it is tarnished by his father having consciously sought it out. While his father manufactured boots, whose link to the world of work are only too evident, Gregory's productive labor consists in trying to manufacture a social being, a task for which he seems particularly ill-equipped.¹³⁰ His monocle becomes "an insignia of leisure," to use Thorstein Veblen's phrase about elegant clothing, signalling his "exemption from personal contact with industrial processes of any kind."¹³¹

Gregory's manufactured identity affects his entire being – when telling a story, he can do nothing but repeat tales “with suitable pantomime, perfected by a hundred tellings. In the middle of a grimace, at the top of an elaborate gesture, he suddenly saw himself grimacing, gesticulating, he suddenly heard the cadences of his voice repeating, by heart, the old phrases.”¹³² At a remove from his own self, the critical regard through which Gregory judges his every action is doubled by the monocle, which as a detachable prosthetic, an item of and for scrutiny, reproduces his self-consciousness. When he tries to use the monocle as a “weapon” to gaze at a love interest, Molly, Gregory clumsily “put up his monocle to look at her” but finds himself incapable of maintaining his sang-froid: “Her eyes were calm and bright. Against that firm and penetrating regard his jocularly, his attempt at insolent tenderness, punctured and crumpled up. He averted his eyes, he let fall his eyeglass. It was a weapon he did not dare or know how to use”¹³³ There is a reversal of gender roles here as Molly's feminine gaze causes Gregory's “weapon” to fall.

The first part of the story, in which Gregory's monocle stands in for self-consciousness, fashionable parties, social vacuity, and theatricality, ends with Gregory leaving the party with a self-styled intellectual, Spiller. Although Spiller had tried to get some money from Gregory at the party, they walk out together after Gregory sees Molly lay her hand on Paxton's knee. In “the brilliance of the Tottenham Court Road,” where the “polished roadway reflected the arc lamps” and “[t]he entrances to the cinema palaces were caverns of glaring yellow light,” Spiller dismisses Gregory's proclaimed love for Molly as an affectation.¹³⁴ To cheer him up, Spiller tells a story of an averted marriage that “lasted well into the Charing Cross Road.”¹³⁵ Once at Cambridge Circus, Gregory “had no difficulty in feeling himself superior” amidst the theater audiences, and “[t]hrough his Cyclopean monocle, he gazed enquiringly at every woman they passed.”¹³⁶ Rather than that “certain haughtiness and power of keeping inferior persons at a distance” that the monocle reputedly gave, Gregory's monocular gaze receives “a smile of invitation; she was ugly, unfortunately, and obviously professional.”¹³⁷ While Spiller continues his soliloquy about art, from a doorway there emerges:

slowly, tremulously, a thing: a bundle of black tatters that moved on a pair of old squashed boots . . . It had hands, in one of which it held a little tray with matchboxes . . . The thing looked at them. Gregory looked at the thing. Their eyes met. Gregory expanded his left eye-socket. The monocle dropped to the end of its silken tether. He felt in his right-hand trouser pocket . . . Half a crown? He hesitated . . . Into the proffered tray he dropped three pennies and a halpenny.¹³⁸

The objectification through Gregory's monocle of this match-box seller, a profession alluding to Victorian misery, is the critical turning point in the story, for the image of “the thing” haunts Gregory as they walk away. Having become conscious of his own class standing, the privilege which he enjoys, and the smugness by which he had judged the “un-aristocratic and vulgar luxury” around him, the horrible feeling of walking away from “the thing” while drunk, and thus having to place “one foot before the other,” Gregory breaks out in a condemnation of the endemic poverty in the na-

232 tion: "there are two million people in England on the brink of starvation. Two million . . . Living in stinking hovels . . . like animals. Worse than animals."¹³⁹ This outburst of class consciousness makes Spiller break out in "gigantic laughter" and his face loses "its monumental, Victorian celebrity's appearance" (252–3). Although Gregory "had made a fool of himself," he "was past caring," for he knows that he is right (253). The monocle, which had been a weapon to be fashionable, to assert class superiority and masculine dominance, has, by the story's end, become a thing confronting "the thing," the matchbox seller whose life is torn apart by the class system. The story concludes with Gregory and Spiller entering a cab, Gregory's monocle getting entangled in the door handle, the string breaking, and the glass dropping to the floor of the cab. Spiller picks it up and returns it to Gregory, who "put it out of harm's way into a waistcoat pocket."¹⁴⁰

While one reading of the story could suggest that the monocle will now be discarded after Gregory saw class inequality up close, the glass remains unbroken and Gregory has kept it treasured and safe. The escape into the world of artificiality remains too strong for Gregory; despite the class tensions which, in the year Huxley published this story, led to the Great Strike, the story seems to suggest that there is no bridging the distance between rich and poor, who inhabit two different symbolic universes. Gregory is trapped, in other words, in monocularity.

IV.

It is through details, Roland Barthes argues, that the field of fashion becomes most expansive: "By giving a great deal of semantic power to 'nothing,' Fashion is, of course, merely following its own system . . . *nothing* can signify *everything* . . . one detail is enough to transform what is outside meaning into meaning, what is unfashionable into Fashion."¹⁴¹ The means by which clothing could be an alternative language, a means of communicating social standing or political ideology, became apparent to most observers in the modernist period. Quentin Crisp, perhaps the last great British dandy, notes that "the symbolism of clothes was recognised by everyone" in the 1920s.¹⁴² Yet this symbolism was not self-evident or univocal. The modern period saw the development of two contradictory fashion tendencies: the relaxation of sumptuary laws, democratization, and the global production and trade in fashion gave a more expansive choice to the individual consumer, while mass production and the spread of bourgeois ethics brought about a countervailing tendency towards standardization that could be most clearly seen in uniforms for factory workers and soldiers in mass armies but which also affected the bourgeoisie.

The monocle fully participated in this symbolic exchange, but what it communicated was hardly fixed. The monocle was both stereotypical (the English duke on the music hall stage, the Prussian officer) yet resistant to a fixed meaning. This was, in many respects, the great complaint made against language by the monocle-wearing Joseph Conrad: words had been worn out by overuse, making them both flat and imprecise. Because the monocle contained within it a series of allusions to the great unresolved issues of the day, such as class dynamics and gender relations, its iconography—the

circle's endlessness versus its evident singularity, transparent yet magnifying, detachable but also embodied—could not be collapsed into a singular meaning. The discourse surrounding the monocle is a history of social groups using this unresolved imagery to further a particular identity. The solid world of certainty that objects inspired was called into doubt by objects which no group could univocally possess. Protean in its meanings, the monocle served a variety of social or national ideologies while always hovering around stereotype. At the same time, the object's ironic potential—avant-gardists made fun of gold-rimmed monocle-wearing bankers and diplomats through the adoption of the same eyewear, lesbians took up the adornment to shatter symmetrical, naturalized feminine beauty—was never far away. The attention that the popular press paid to the article signalled its ambiguity, the sense that something was not right in the kingdom of monocularity, whose empire could not be demarcated by clear boundaries. The process by which these competing ideologies arose—the rise of cultural capital in democratizing societies prompting the impulse for what Tocqueville called individualism in situations of increasing uniformity—is in many ways the story of modernity.

Notes

1. Comte G. De Contades, *Le Comte d'Orsay: Physiologue d'un roi de la mode* (Paris: Maison Quantin, 1890), 2; Thomas Kunkel, *Genius in Disguise: Harold Ross of The New Yorker* (New York: Random House, 1995), 92, 98.
2. Mary F. Corey, *The World Through a Monocle: The New Yorker at Midcentury* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 1.
3. Kunkel, *Genius in Disguise*, 115.
4. Matthew Josephson to Tristan Tzara, 18 September 1961, in Bibliothèque Littéraire Jacques Doucet (Paris), Tzara Collection, TZR C 2194. On the avant-garde and fashion, see Brigit Doherty, "Fashionable Ladies, Dada Dandies," *Art Journal* 54.1 (1995): 46–50.
5. *Birmingham Daily Post*, 3 January 1900, 4.
6. *Washington Post*, 9 December 1913, 3.
7. *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 20 May 1898, 6.
8. *New York Times*, 13 November 1936, 10.
9. On monocles in Proust, see Roger Shattuck, *Proust's Binoculars: A Study of Memory, Time, and Recognition in À la recherche du temps perdu* (New York: Random House, 1963), 7–8; and David Mendelson, *Le Verre et les objets de verre dans l'univers imaginaire de Marcel Proust* (Paris: José Corti, 1968), 85.
10. See especially Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990); Caroline A. Jones, *Eyesight Alone: Clement Greenberg's Modernism and the Bureaucratization of the Senses* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); and Sara Danius, "Novel Visions and the Crisis of Culture: Visual Technology, Modernism, and Death in the *Magic Mountain*," *boundary 2* 27.2 (2000): 177–211. Danius mainly examines the X-ray.
11. Michael V. Ball, "The Economic Importance of the Conservation of Vision," *The Scientific Monthly* 20.3 (1925): 278. This special issue was entitled "Problems of Western Civilization."
12. *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 3 August 1899, 12.
13. *The Times*, 9 October 1945, 5.
14. See Arjun Appadurai, "Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value," in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 3–63; Douglas Mao, *Solid Objects: Modernism and the Test of Production* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998); Bill Brown, *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); and the August 2001 special issue of *Critical Inquiry*, "Things."

15. *The Times*, 11 April 1961, 11.
16. Henry Green, "Apologia," in *Surviving: The Uncollected Writings of Henry Green*, ed. Matthew Yorke (New York: Viking, 1993), 92. On dress as a metaphor for style, see Tzvetan Todorov, *Theories of the Symbol*, trans. Catherine Porter (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), 74–5.
17. Charles Baudelaire, "Le Peintre de la vie moderne," in *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Claude Pichois (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, Gallimard, 1976), vol. 2, 683–724, at 695–6. All translations mine unless noted.
18. Cyril Connolly saw dandyism growing with more individuals "tak[ing] refuge from the world in private salvation." See *Enemies of Promise* (New York: Macmillan, 1948 [1938]), 38.
19. Quoted in Philippe Perrot, *Les dessus et les dessous de la bourgeoisie: Une histoire du vêtement au XIXe siècle* (Paris: Fayard, 1981), 38.
20. Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991).
21. Joanne Entwistle, *The Fashioned Body: Fashion, Dress and Modern Social Theory* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), 117.
22. Herbert Spencer, *The Principles of Sociology*, 3 vols. (London: Williams and Norgate, 1893), vol. 2, §423, 205.
23. See Rhonda Garelick, *Rising Star: Dandyism, Gender, and Performance in the Fin de Siècle* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).
24. *The Times*, 13 March 1827, 4.
25. Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus: The Life and Opinions of Herr Teufelsdröckh* (London: Chapman and Hall, n.d. [1831]), 188 (bk. 3, ch. 10).
26. "Our Friend," *Fashion*, 1898, 23; quoted in Brent Shannon, "ReFashioning Men: Fashion, Masculinity, and the Cultivation of the Male Consumer in Britain, 1860–1914," *Victorian Studies* 46.4 (2004): 614.
27. Eduard Fuchs, "Bourgeois Dress" (1912), in *The Rise of Fashion: A Reader*, ed. Daniel Leonhard Purdy (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 319.
28. Frank Alvah Parsons, *The Psychology of Dress* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Page, 1923), 300.
29. Jane Garrity, "Selling Culture to the 'Civilized': Bloomsbury, British *Vogue*, and the Marketing of National Identity," *Modernism/modernity* 6.2 (1999): 29–58.
30. Cinzia Sartini Blum, "The Futurist Re-Fashioning of the Universe," *South Central Review* 13.2/3 (1996): 82–104.
31. J.C. Flugel, *The Psychology of Clothes* (London: Hogarth Press, 1950 [1930]), 16.
32. *Ibid.*, 111.
33. *Ibid.*, 113.
34. Perrot, *Les dessus et les dessous de la bourgeoisie*, 61.
35. Flugel, *Psychology of Clothes*, 118.
36. Aldous Huxley, "The Monocle," in *Two or Three Graces and Other Stories* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1926), 221–253, at 226.
37. Flugel, *Psychology of Clothes*, 37.
38. *Ibid.*
39. In 1926, the *Guardian* reported that asymmetrical fashion was all the rage in Paris; this consisted of "the wearing of one ear-ring only" and "an asymmetrical hat, pulled well down on one side" – but these two items together formed a kind of symmetry. The paper noted that "[i]n England asymmetry is chiefly provided by the monocle." *Manchester Guardian*, 22 November 1926, 6.
40. Richard Corson, *Fashion in Eyeglasses* (London: Peter Owen, 1980), 114.
41. Corson, *Fashion in Eyeglasses*, 114.
42. D.C. Davidson and R.J.S. MacGregor, *Spectacles, Lorgnettes and Monocles*, 2nd ed. (Princes Risborough: Shire Books, 2002), 14.
43. F. Darton & Co., *Optical Goods* (London: Clerkenwell Optical Works, 1908), n.p.
44. "Hard Times," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* 90.536 (January 1895): 330.
45. This is from an anonymous German treatise on glasses, published in Leipzig in 1824; quoted in Corson, *Fashion in Eyeglasses*, 118.

46. William Kitchiner, *The Economy of the Eyes*, 2nd ed. (London: Whittaker, 1826), 22 (emphasis original).
47. Quoted in Corson, *Fashion in Eyeglasses*, 110, 112.
48. *Guardian*, 5 January 1921, 8.
49. Tom Stoppard, *Travesties* (London: Faber and Faber, 1975), 55.
50. As Anne Hollander puts it, “[f]ashion abhors fixity, of form or meaning”; see her *Sex and Suits* (Brinkworth: Claridge Press, 1994), 17.
51. *The Times*, 5 June 1911, 4.
52. *Washington Post*, 12 June 1920, 6.
53. *The Times*, 25 June 1941, 5. This editorial was sparked by news that a police officer on the Westminster beat was seen wearing a monocle; in other words, the issue was one of class transgression (which was also the case when there were reports of privates sporting monocles).
54. Tom Driberg, *Ruling Passions* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1977), 1.
55. Quoted in C. Willett and Phillis Cunningham, *Handbook of English Costume in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Faber and Faber, 1959), 226.
56. *Pall Mall Gazette*, 30 October 1893, 5.
57. *The Times*, 2 October 1907, 14.
58. Max Beerbohm, “An Inquiry into a Convention,” *Saturday Review*, 19 December 1903, 760–1, at 760. This convention was still going strong in 1916: “The stage Englishman is still with us . . . the drawl, the monocle, and the general make-up of the ‘silly ass’.” In James Davenport Whelpley, “The Englishman in America,” *Outlook*, 19 January 1916, 144.
59. Melanie Taylor, “*Peter (A Young English Girl)*: Visualizing Transgender Masculinities,” *Camera Obscura* 56 (2004): 28.
60. *Pall Mall Gazette*, 30 October 1893, 5.
61. Frank Kermode, *Wallace Stevens* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1960), 45.
62. Wallace Stevens, “Le Monocle de Mon Oncle,” in *Collected Poetry and Prose*, ed. Frank Kermode and Joan Richardson (New York: Library of America, 1997), 10–14.
63. *Ibid.*, 10.
64. *Ibid.*, 12.
65. *Washington Post*, 12 August 1906, SM8.
66. *New York Tribune*, 5 April 1922, 6; *New York Times*, 6 August 1933, E4.
67. *Washington Post*, 26 August 1934, SM7.
68. *Manchester Guardian*, 9 June 1920, 8.
69. Djuna Barnes, *Nightwood* (New York: New Directions, 1946), 135.
70. *Ibid.*, 1.
71. *Ibid.*, 9.
72. *Ibid.*, 8, 11.
73. *Ibid.*, 38.
74. *Ibid.*, 7.
75. *Ibid.*
76. *Ibid.*, 40, 49.
77. *Ibid.*, 107.
78. *Ibid.*, 117.
79. *Ibid.*, 120.
80. *Ibid.*, 121–2.
81. *Ibid.*, 122.
82. Wodehouse quoted in Corson, *Fashion in Eyeglasses*, p. 222; *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 8 January 1893, 6.
83. *The Times*, 2 January 1939, 12.
84. *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 11 February 1895, 6.
85. *Washington Post*, 20 September 1921, 6.
86. *New York Times*, 20 May 1922, 17.

87. "An 'Exquisite Creature'," *The Youth's Companion* 93 (6 November 1919), 624.
88. Arthur Guiterman, "What! No Monocles?," *New York Times*, 7 December 1941, SM37.
89. Robert Fyne, "Review of *We'll Always Have the Movies: American Cinema During World War II*," *Film & History* 36.2 (2006): 60–1, at 60.
90. C.A. Lejeune, "The Films," *Observer*, 7 June 1942, 2.
91. *New York Tribune*, 16 December 1900, A5.
92. *New York Times*, 2 August 1915, S6.
93. H. Rider Haggard, *King Solomon's Mines*, ed. Dennis Butts (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989 [1885]), 54.
94. *Ibid.*, 109, 54.
95. *Ibid.*, 9.
96. *Ibid.*, 74, 172.
97. *Ibid.*, 117.
98. *Ibid.*, 119.
99. *Ibid.*, 299.
100. *Ibid.*, 195.
101. *Ibid.*, 178.
102. Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 153.
103. See Garber, *Vested Interests*, 152–5; Shari Benstock, *Women of the Left Bank: Paris, 1900–1940* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), 173–181; Taylor, "Peter (A Young English Girl)"; Susan Gubar, "Blessings in Disguise: Cross Dressing as Re-Dressing for Female Modernists," *Massachusetts Review* 22.3 (1981): 477–508; and Laura Doan, "Passing Fashions: Reading Female Masculinities in the 1920s," *Feminist Studies* 24.3 (1998): 663–700.
104. Richard Ormrod, *Una Troubridge: The Friend of Radcliffe Hall* (New York: Carroll and Graf, 1985), 153.
105. Tirza True Latimer, *Women Together / Women Apart: Portraits of Lesbian Paris* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 44; Beach quoted in Diana Souhami, *Wild Girls Paris, Sappho and Art: The Lives and Loves of Natalie Barney and Romaine Brooks* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2004), 2.
106. Benstock, *Women of the Left Bank*, 181.
107. Garber, *Vested Interests*, 154 (emphasis original).
108. Quoted in Corson, *Fashion in Eyeglasses*, 199.
109. Henry James, "Glasses," in *The Complete Tales of Henry James*, ed. Leon Edel (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1964), vol. 9, 354.
110. Tristan Tzara, "La Première aventure céleste de M. Antipyrine," in *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Henri Behar, 6 vols. (Paris: Flammarion, 1975–1991), vol. 82.
111. "Rosalind's Fashions," *Penny Illustrated Paper and Illustrated Times*, 26 November 1898, 342.
112. *New York Tribune*, 28 February 1903, 7.
113. *Washington Post*, 3 December 1913, 11.
114. *Washington Post*, 20 February 1921, 31; *New York Times*, 25 February 1923, X11.
115. See "Surrey Captain's Monocled Bride," accessed March 6, 2013, <http://www.britishpathe.com/video/surrey-captains-monocled-bride-1>.
116. On angularity in female fashion in the 1920s, see Mary Louise Roberts, *Civilization without Sexes: The Reconstruction of Gender in Postwar France, 1917–1927* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 68.
117. On the trauma of the eye disease which debilitated Huxley's sight in his adolescence, see Nicholas Murray, *Aldous Huxley: An English Intellectual* (London: Little, Brown, 2002), 31.
118. Huxley has often been presented as a writer whose main concern was social critique; see Frederick J. Hoffman, "Aldous Huxley and the Novel of Ideas," in *Aldous Huxley: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1974), 17, and Milton Birnbaum, *Aldous Huxley's Quest for Values* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1971), 61.

119. Huxley, "The Monocle," 221.
120. Ibid.
121. Ibid., 222.
122. One should also note that the popularity of monocles grew in Britain during WWI as civilian men emulated monocled officers; see *Washington Post*, 2 July 1916, ES12.
123. Huxley, "The Monocle," 223.
124. Ibid., 228.
125. Ibid., 224.
126. Ibid., 224–5.
127. Ibid., 233.
128. Ibid., 234–5.
129. Ibid., 225–6 (emphasis original).
130. On Victorian attitudes towards theatrical behaviour, see Rebecca F. Stern, "Moving Parts and Speaking Parts: Situating Victorian Antitheatricality," *ELH* 65.2 (1998): 423–449.
131. Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York: The Modern Library, 2001 [1899]), 125–6.
132. Huxley, "The Monocle," 229.
133. Ibid., 240–1.
134. Ibid., 244.
135. Ibid., 245.
136. Ibid., 246.
137. *The Times*, 25 June 1941, 5; Huxley, "The Monocle," 247.
138. Ibid., 250–1.
139. Ibid., 246, 251, 252.
140. Ibid., 253.
141. Roland Barthes, *The Fashion System*, trans. Matthew Ward and Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990 [1967]), 243 (emphasis original).
142. Quentin Crisp, *The Naked Civil Servant* (London: Flamingo, 1985 [1977]), 27.